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The Catholic Historical Review

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THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION¹

When the call went out in June, 1884, for a meeting to be held at Saratoga the following September, with the purpose of organizing into an American Historical Association teachers, specialists, writers and others interested in the advancement of historical study in this country, the outlook was by no means a favorable one.²

Although the project was strongly encouraged on all sides, particularly by the religious press of the country, the number of students capable of taking a serious share in the work of historical research then being promoted in the United States was indeed limited. There were at that time scarcely twenty professors and instructors in our leading educational institutions who were giving their entire time to the class in history. In most

¹ Address read at the Inaugural Session of the AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, Cleveland, Ohio, December 30, 1919. Some fifty Catholic scholars were present at the organization of this new national society. The object of the AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION is to promote study and research in the field of Catholic history. The Association is composed of three Conferences on Ancient Church History, Medieval Church History, and Modern Church History. Such a society makes it possible to bring into one body all the Catholic historical scholarship of the United States. The following officers were elected: *President*, Lawrence F. Flick, M.D., LL.D.; *Vice-Presidents*, Rev. Richard H. Tierney, S.J., and Rev. Victor O'Daniel, O.P., S.T.M.; *Secretary*, Carlton J. H. Hayes, Ph.D.; *Treasurer*, Rt. Rev. Monsignor T. C. O'Reilly, D.D., V.G.; *Archivist*, Rev. Peter Guilday, Ph.D. The Executive Council includes, with the above-named officers, Rev. Gilbert P. Jennings, LL.D. (Cleveland), Rt. Rev. Monsignor Joseph F. Mooney, D.D., V.G. (New York), Rev. Dr. Souvay, C.M. (St. Louis), Rev. William Busch, L.M.H.Sc. (St. Paul), and Rev. Zephyrin Engelhardt, O.F.M. (Santa Barbara, Calif.). The First Annual Meeting will take place December 27-30, 1920.

² *Papers of the American Historical Association*, Vol. i, No. 1, p. 5.

cases, history was merely an adjunct to some other science. Thirty-five years ago some of our leading universities and colleges were cautiously considering whether a professorship of history could or could not be established; and even so well known a scholar as President Eliot of Harvard warned a group of students at the time that to fit themselves for such a professorship would be the height of imprudence.³

Since then the situation has been completely changed.

To no other division of historical study was this change more welcome than to ecclesiastical history. The modern period had been ushered in with a systematic assault on the Church's past by the Centuriators of Magdeburg. Objective estimate of historical facts and impartiality of treatment were laid aside in the long sixteenth-century struggle for what may be termed religious self-determination. Only after three hundred years, and then under the influence of the romantic school of the early nineteenth century, did the historical world reach a better appreciation of medieval Catholicism. To many, besides Joseph de Maistre, historical criticism meant participation in that general conspiracy against the truth which was then apparently dominating the learned world. This new era in modern historiography with its more penetrating and more objective criticism of Church history brought about a series of vindications of the Catholic past of the world.

Catholic students of history recognize as one of the causes of this new era the opening of the Vatican Archives by Pope Leo XIII, in 1883. At that time, the great Pontiff could write without fear of bias that the method of treating history had been turned "into a means of throwing suspicion upon the Church." In the *Saepenumero considerantes* of August 18, 1883, Pope Leo dealt severely with the situation in his day: History had become a deadly poison; it had created a new species of warfare against the Christian faith; it had become subservient to the interests of parties and to the passions of men; it was imbuing the minds of the young with disgust for venerable antiquity and with an overweening contempt for most holy personages; it had strayed far from the path it had trod in olden times when it was the

³ *The American Historical Association* (1884-1909), article by J. Franklin Jameson, Ph.D., in the *American Historical Review*, Vol. xv, (1909), pp. 1-13.

preceptor of life and the light of truth; it had become the approver of vice and the slave of corruption. In this same letter which opened the historical treasures of Rome to the world, the Pontiff laid down in the clearest terms the fundamental principle which should guide the Catholic method in historical study.

No effort should be spared to refute inventions and falsehoods; and the writers must always bear this rule in mind: that the first law of history is, not to dare to utter falsehood; the second, not to fear to speak the truth; and, moreover, no room must be left for suspicion of partiality or prejudice.⁴

Students of history can well recognize in this noble utterance of Pope Leo one of the contributing causes to the renaissance of historical interest centering around the year 1884. In the changed, indeed sympathetic, attitude of scholarship in this country since that time towards the past history of the Church, foremost stands the influence of the American Historical Association.

The founders of the Association in that year were, without knowing it, at the beginning of a new and more fruitful era in the development of American historiography. The forty gentlemen who met at Saratoga on September 9, 1884, for the inaugural session of the Association began their conference with the problem of defining their relationship to existing historical organizations. The decision to form an independent society, and one open to all interested in historical study, was quickly reached. Doctor Jameson has described this meeting as follows:

The simple constitution then framed, and adopted the next day, has with slight alterations served the Association to the present time. But its preparation brought up at once some of the gravest questions of the society's future, questions vividly debated in the committee. Should the effort be made to form something like an Academy of History, small in numbers, imposing in the weight of its individual members, and exerting through that weight a powerful influence on the development of the science; or should the society be a more popular body into which any respectable and educated person interested in history might be admitted? One who stood upon the losing side of the question has since described it as being "whether we should try to be as big as possible or as good as possible." This has a specious sound, but "good" in such matters

⁴ Pope Leo's Letter to Cardinals di Luca, Pitra, and Hergenroether will be found in English in the *Ave Maria* (Notre Dame), Vol. xix (1883), pp. 741-761, and in Latin as an Appendix to STANG, *Historiographia Ecclesiastica*. Louvain, 1897.

is good in relation to the existing conditions and the possibilities of achievement. Nothing has prevented any member from presenting to the Association as learned and profound a paper as he might have presented to a select forty having thirty-nine specialties different from his; and in any body, the older heads have their full share of influence. On the other hand, how largely has the American public, scientific or other, shown itself disposed to defer to the authority, in any time, of forty Immortals—immortals voiceless for lack of endowment, and unable to obtain governmental support unless with governmental selection? Diffusion of influence, diffused participation, is the democratic mode. The older element is quickened and helped by the presence of the younger; the wiser, even, by the presence of those whom in American life they must perforce address. It would be hard to persuade anyone who has attended a meeting of the American Historical Association and carefully watched what goes on, in and out of the formal sessions, that a gathering from which nine-tenths of the present attendants were absent would do as much good for the common cause.⁵

The story of the Association's success during the past thirty-five years is too well known to need review in this paper. It has been justly claimed that no historical society in the world has been more extensively useful to its countrymen. None who participated in the work of organizing the Association that pleasant September day in 1884 ever regretted his share in its foundation.

We are honored this morning by the presence of one who was present in Saratoga as a Founder of the Association. Doctor Jameson may not be known personally to the majority of those present at this meeting, but those of us who have enjoyed his friendship have learned to esteem him as a sincere admirer of the historic past of our Church, as one whose life has been given generously and uncomplainingly to the steady advance of historical study in this country and abroad. We are fortunate in having him among us this morning, thirty-five years afterwards, at the inaugural session of this new national Catholic Historical Association, and I rejoice to have the opportunity at this auspicious moment to pay to him a tribute of high regard and appreciation for all he has done during the past generation in making Catholic history better understood.

The twofold purpose of the American Historical Association, namely, to advance the interests of American history and of

⁵ As in note 3.

general history in America has never been lost sight of from the beginning. There is this difference among Catholic students of history: many societies for the study of American Catholic history have been founded; but in the field of general Church history there has never been any attempt at national organization on the part of American Catholics, while in that of the church history of America, Catholic scholarship in the United States has had a better representation since 1884 than any other religious body.

The year 1884 will, therefore, be perpetually memorable in American Catholic history.

The Third Plenary Council of Baltimore held in November-December, 1884, saw the high-water mark of this national interest in our Catholic past. For the first time since the beginning of her phenomenal growth after the Civil War, the Church acted and thought as a national body; and in the Pastoral Letter to the Faithful at the close of the Council we find this striking Charge:

Train your children to a love of history and biography. Inspire them with the ambition to become so well acquainted with the history and doctrines of the Church as to be able to give an intelligent answer to any honest inquiry. . . . Teach your children to take a special interest in the history of our own country. We consider the establishment of our country's independence, the shaping of its liberties and laws as a work of special Providence, its framers 'building wiser than they knew', the Almighty's hand guiding them. . . . As we desire therefore that the history of the United States should be carefully taught in all our Catholic schools, and have directed that it be specially dwelt upon in the education of the young ecclesiastical students in our preparatory seminaries; so also we desire that it form a favorite part of the home library and home reading. We must keep firm and solid the liberties of our country by keeping fresh the noble memories of the past, and thus sending forth from our Catholic homes into the arena of public life not partisans but patriots.⁶

The whole country was awake in 1884 for the first time to the patriotic impulses which vivified our past history. At the first preliminary meeting in 1884 of those who are today the founders of our splendidly equipped American Historical Association, Justin Winsor said:

⁶ To be found in the *Memorial Volume* of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore (*ad finem*). Baltimore, 1885.

We have come, gentlemen, to organize a new society, and fill a new field. Existing historical societies are local, by State and division of States, and give themselves only to the history of our own country. The only one not plainly by its title local, the American Antiquarian Society, is nevertheless very largely confined in its researches to New England subjects, though it sometimes stretches its ken to Central America and the Northwest. But our proposed name, though American by title, is not intended to confine our observation to this continent. We are to be simply American students devoting ourselves to historical subjects, without limitation in time or place. So no one can regard us as a rival of any other historical association in this country. We are drawn together because we believe there is a new spirit of research abroad—a spirit which emulates the laboratory work of the naturalists, using that word in its broadest sense. This spirit requires for its sustenance mutual recognition and suggestion among its devotees. We can deduce encouragement and experience stimulation by this sort of personal contact. Scholars and students can no longer afford to live isolated. They must come together to derive that zest which arises from personal acquaintance, to submit idiosyncrasies to the contact of their fellows, and they will come from the convocation healthier and more circumspect. The future of this new work is in the young men of the historical instinct—largely in the rising instructors of our colleges; and I am glad to see that they have not failed us in the present movement. . . . Those of us who are older are quickened by their presence.⁷

What Justin Winsor was to the country at large, John Gilmary Shea was to the Catholic Church of the United States. These two scholars had much in common, and some of Shea's most scholarly work was done for the *Narrative and Critical History of America*, which has justly given to Winsor a unique place in American historiography. Shea's fine, delicate enthusiasm can be seen beneath those words from the Pastoral which have just been quoted, for he was called to Baltimore during the Council to confer with the prelates on his *History of the Church in the United States*. No man felt the new spirit abroad more keenly than he. On August 3, 1884, he wrote to Monsignor Lambing:

I never knew a greater interest to be felt or shown in the history of *Notre Mère la Sainte Eglise Catholique, Apostolique et Romaine* in this part of the world. This is extremely gratifying to me, and I trust we can encourage and maintain this feeling.

Both Winsor and Shea had vision—to use a commonplace of today. Winsor was chairman of the preliminary meetings which

⁷ *Papers of the AHA, l. c., p. 11.*

brought the American Historical Association into existence; Shea presided over the first meeting of the United States Catholic Historical Society of New York. Both gentlemen declined the presidency of the Society they helped to bring to life, for both were working at the time on volumes which have since made them known to the scholars of two continents. The work they began has flourished with vigor down to our own day. There are at the present time in the United States and Canada over five hundred organizations bearing the name of historical society. Secretary Leland of the American Historical Association has described this growth as follows:

The American Nation more perhaps than any other is curious as to its history. Possibly this is because the American regards the history of his country, or at any rate of his State or locality, as a personal matter. Much of it has been made within the period covered by his own memory; he himself or his ancestors have had a part in making it; the beginnings of America are not so remote as to defy the imagination. At any rate, whatever the explanation, there are more historical societies in the United States than in any other country. They are devoted for the most part to the history of various territorial areas, but there are some that occupy themselves with other fields. Of such probably none have greater possibilities of usefulness than those which are concerned mainly with church or religious history. There are not many of these—the American Baptist Historical Society of Philadelphia, the New England Baptist Historical Society of Boston, the Presbyterian Historical Society of Philadelphia, and the Unitarian and Universalist Historical Societies, both naturally of Massachusetts, are the only societies devoted to the history of the non-Catholic denominations that find mention in a report made some years ago to the American Historical Association.⁸

In the field of religious history a better representation is seen in the number of Catholic historical societies founded since that date and in the fine quality of the studies published by these organizations. Our oldest Catholic Historical Society is the AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA, founded in July, 1884.⁹ Letters were sent out on July 4, 1884, and the first meeting of its founders was held on July 22 of that year. The minutes of that meeting are very instructive. The

⁸ *Concerning Catholic Historical Societies*, article by Waldo G. Leland, in the CATHOLIC HISTORICAL REVIEW, Vol. ii, p. 389.

⁹ *The American Catholic Historical Society*, article by Rev. William Lallou, in the CATHOLIC HISTORICAL REVIEW, Vol. i, pp. 193-195.

reasons for the Society were quite plainly described: the early history of the Church in the United States was comparatively unknown; valuable records and traditions were being lost for want of a corporate body to gather them together; interest in church history in general was very weak. "The object of this Society," we read in its Charter, "shall be the preservation and publication of Catholic American historical documents, the investigation of Catholic American history, especially that of Philadelphia."¹⁰ The success of this undertaking is seen in the quarterly publication, the *Records*, which is now in its thirtieth volume.

The second of these Societies—the UNITED STATES CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY, founded in New York on December 9, 1884, owes its existence mainly to John Gilmary Shea.¹¹ The Third Plenary Council closed on December 7, 1884, and two days later, a number of gentlemen interested in history, at the invitation of Doctor Shea and Doctor Richard H. Clarke, met at the Catholic Protectory in New York to organize the United States Catholic Historical Society.

The success of these two pioneer Societies has been equal to that of any similar organization in the United States. Both were regarded from the outset by non-Catholic students as national Catholic historical societies devoted to American Church history.

The third Catholic Historical Society is the now defunct OHIO VALLEY CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY, organized by Monsignor Lambing, of Wilkinsburg, Pa., February 1, 1885. This Society met once or twice and then disbanded.¹² Monsignor Lambing, the President, began in July, 1884, as a private venture, the quarterly publication of the *Historical Researches of Western Pennsylvania, principally Catholic*, which was changed in the course of a year to the *Catholic Historical Researches*. After two years of effort to make it a success, Martin I. J. Griffin, the grand old man of American Catholic historical circles in

¹⁰ ACHS *Records*, Vol. i, pp. 1-14.

¹¹ *The United States Catholic Historical Society*, article by Charles G. Herbermann, LL.D., in the CATHOLIC HISTORICAL REVIEW, Vol. ii, pp. 302-307.

¹² *The Story of a Failure: The Ohio Valley Catholic Historical Society*, in the CATHOLIC HISTORICAL REVIEW, Vol. i, pp. 435-439.

Philadelphia, purchased the *Researches* in December, 1886, and published them until his death in November, 1911, as the *American Catholic Historical Researches*. Later they were merged into the quarterly *Records* of the same Society.

Of the societies founded since 1884, there were: the BROOKLYN CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY, and the NEW ENGLAND CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY, established in 1901, both of which have apparently ceased to function; the CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF ST. PAUL, founded in 1905, the *Acta et Dicta* of which are becoming more valuable with each number; the MAINE CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY founded by the scholarly Doctor Walsh, Bishop of Portland, in 1913, which publishes the *Maine Catholic Historical Magazine*, now in its eighth volume; the CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF ST. LOUIS, founded by a group of Catholic scholars of that city in 1917, which publishes the *St. Louis Catholic Historical Review*; and the ILLINOIS CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY, founded at Chicago, in February, 1918, which issues a scholarly quarterly—the *Illinois Catholic Historical Review*. “During the past five years,” to use Mr. Leland’s words, “there has appeared from the Catholic University of America, the CATHOLIC HISTORICAL REVIEW, which has received most favorable notice from the historical profession in general and which promises to become the recognized organ of all American Catholic historical activity.”¹³

To start an entirely new organization in this field requires very serious reasons. In describing the formation of the Catholic Historical Society of St. Louis, Father Rothensteiner says:

In an age of innumerable societies, associations and unions, for every conceivable purpose, it may seem supererogatory and utterly hopeless to come forward with our Society. . . . A society for the suppression of all societies would appear to many weary souls as of greater importance. Yet it must always be borne in mind that, besides the bad and indifferent organizations, there are also many of high character and distinct usefulness. The living principle of every kind of activity being one with its purpose, it follows that the higher the purpose of an institution, the more highly must we value the institution itself, provided its proposed end could not be better attained in other ways.¹⁴

These words may well be taken as the keynote of all that

¹³ As in note 7.

¹⁴ *St. Louis Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. i, p. 8.

follows. Creative agencies of a broader and deeper interest in the history of the Church cannot be confined to Catholic historical groups such as those mentioned above. The combined action of the best scholars of the American Historical Association is just beginning, after twenty years' effort, to save the public schools and the non-sectarian colleges from their present state of mal-organization in the historical sciences. One has but to study the conclusions of the different committees of the American Historical Association to realize that the great change which has come into the teaching of political history could never have occurred, were it not for the Reports of the Committee of Seven and the Committee of Eight which form the basis of the present curriculum of history in most of the schools in this country.

The Catholic school system needs a similar guidance, and the work to be done is too vast for any one scholar or for any one local group of historical scholars. The voice that speaks must represent the whole country and the best historical talent in the land.

Historical scholars of today, with but few exceptions, and those negligible ones, recognize with sympathy the part the Church has had in the civilization of the world. But they cannot be expected to devote themselves exclusively to that historical Catholic past. The spirit of the American Historical Association has never been a provincial one, but the incorporation of the Association by the Government in January 1889, created a dependence on the Smithsonian Institution which has affected the publishing of articles on religious history. In regard to this censorship, I quote from Doctor Jameson's illuminating article on the American Historical Association:

The Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution is likely, in the exercise of this somewhat anomalous function, to confine himself to the exclusion, from a report presented to Congress, of matter such as is usually excluded from other reports offered to that body. This, however, effects two serious limitations, the one based on political, the other on religious, grounds. In the first place, it is not probable, for instance, that the Association could print in a governmental volume such an article as that which Professor Hart contributed to the third volume of the old papers, *The Biography of a River and Harbor Bill*, a most plain-spoken analysis of recent Congressional proceedings. In the second place, Congress has a peculiar traditional feeling with regard to the printing of

religious matter. The religion of the Hopi or the Igorrote is deemed a legitimate subject for historical discussion in a scientific publication of the government. Not so the Christian religion. While excellent reasons for restraint in the treatment of its history, in volumes paid for by public taxation, must occur to every right-thinking mind, instances of unreasonable objection on the part of individual members, or of unreasonable clamor on the part of portions of the public have pushed Congress into strange extremes of caution. An impartial essay on the Spiritual Franciscans of the thirteenth century or the Interdict as practised in the twelfth would seem to be a perfectly non-explosive compound; but the authorities of the Smithsonian Institution, interpreting the mind of Congress as by long experience they have found it, have ruled that such discussions fall outside the lines of the Annual Reports. The limitation thus effected is a grave one, especially in the history of the Middle Ages, for medieval history with the Church omitted would almost be *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out.¹⁵

There is but one Society in the United States devoted to ecclesiastical history in its broadest sense—the American Society of Church History. Founded in 1888, by Philip Schaff, it held annual meetings in New York and published a volume of papers each year until 1896 when it was merged into the American Historical Association, becoming the Church History Section. It was soon evident that the merger was not an acceptable one to all concerned; in 1906, the Society was reorganized as an independent organization. There are some Catholics in its membership, and a few papers by Catholic students have been printed during the past thirty-one years.

A distinctly Catholic organization with the definite object of promoting interest in Catholic history both in this and other lands, of this and other ages, seems necessary, if the Church is to be recognized in her true position as the sacred and perpetual mother of all that is best and holiest in modern civilization.

An American Catholic Historical Association would arouse among Catholics in this roseate land of opportunity an instinct of love and veneration for the religious history of the world. This ideal any scholar or any group of scholars might well consider fitting for the work of a lifetime; for the one ultimate end of such an organization, the one doctrine upon which it is built, the only one upon which it may rest in all surety of purpose, is to promote among those who rejoice in the name of Catholic a more

¹⁵ As in note 3.

intimate knowledge of the history of the Kingdom of God on earth.

This, then, is the project which I have the honor of placing before you this morning. It is a project commensurate with the historical scholarship existent in the Church of our beloved country. Ambitious in its design, it is essentially necessary in its concept, if the glorious annals of our Faith are to be made known in all their beauty to Catholic and non-Catholic alike. For twenty centuries the Church has never faltered in its marvelous work of civilization. Across the ages its doctrine has shown the road to salvation; its apostolate has guided mankind into ways of righteousness; its institutions have ever been rallying the hosts of God against the powers of evil; its struggles and triumphs have attracted to its side men and women of every creed and race; and its salutary influence upon life, upon letters, arts, sciences, and culture has never slackened since the day when Pentecost's fire set ablaze the hearts of men with the highest idealism the world has seen.

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Washington, D. C.